



Pulling Back from the Brink — all rights: Nili Lubrani Roinik

Israel on the Brink: Can the People Stop the Freefall?

by **Osnat Lubrani**

Israel is not just at war—it is unravelling. The events of October 7 did not create Israel's internal rupture, but they did expose and accelerate it. The country was already in crisis, fractured by deep political divides, mass protests, and assaults on democratic institutions. The Hamas attack shattered its sense of security, pushing a society already on edge into cascading breakdown across military, moral, political, and societal lines. Israel now teeters on the edge of a dangerous abyss deepened by a prolonged and punishing war. Alongside enduring challenges of defense and

security, the very foundations of its democracy, cohesion, and international legitimacy are under threat.

A Nation in Breakdown

Moral compass broken

The October 7 Hamas attack was a brutal, coordinated onslaught of unprecedented scale. Massacres, sexual violence, indiscriminate killings, and the abduction of civilians—including children—shocked Israel to its core, shattering long-held assumptions about deterrence and security.

Gripped by grief and fear, the nation lost capacity for self-reflection. A single-minded focus on rescuing hostages and reasserting strength pushed aside reckoning with the consequences of Israel's response. What began as a military campaign escalated into a war of retribution, marked by mass destruction, mounting civilian deaths, and rhetoric where vengeance overtook restraint.

The October 7 attack exposed the scale of the Hamas threat, including its military buildup just across the border. In this context, Israel's military response

can be understood as a justifiable imperative. But from the outset, the war lacked a clear strategy to neutralize the threat or bring the campaign to a close, resulting in over 51,000 Palestinian deaths, a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza, significant Israeli losses, and a draining of national capacity. The absence of an exit strategy has prolonged suffering and delayed much-needed reckoning.

Israel has managed to contain wider escalation from Hezbollah, the Houthis, and Iran through targeted strikes. Yet expanded offensives in Syria and Lebanon, and open talk of striking Iran, risk triggering regional war. While Israel may not seek full-scale conflict, it seems inclined to sustain instability to weaken adversaries.

Since the collapse of a temporary ceasefire in March, bombardments in Gaza have resumed, all aid remains blocked, and hospitals barely function. Starvation and disease are spreading. Hundreds more civilians have died. Gaza lies in ruins. Any talk of reconstruction has been deferred indefinitely. In fact, plans are advancing for an expansion of the offensive, with the now openly stated aim of long-term occupation.

Evidence of serious violations of international humanitarian law is mounting, including indiscriminate attacks and targeting of civilians and infrastructure. One harrowing case involved 15 medics from the Red Crescent, civil defense, and a UN agency buried in a mass grave. Autopsies and eyewitness accounts suggest they were executed at close range. While investigations continue, the case adds to other corroborated war crimes—many documented by Israeli soldiers themselves.

Israel's moral compass may have been compromised long before October 7—shaped by decades of occupation and impunity. But post-October conduct

has marked a new low. Senior officials have publicly branded all Palestinian civilians, even infants, as legitimate targets—language once unthinkable. Denial of aid to the point of starvation is discussed as a permissible tactic. In the West Bank, violence has surged; settler rampages and incitement continue with impunity, often enabled by state inaction or the complicity of security forces.

In May 2024, the International Criminal Court issued arrest warrants for Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Gallant. Legal exposure has spread to soldiers identified in footage, now at risk of prosecution abroad.

Israel's foreign policy response—rooted in denial and in accusations of anti-Israel bias often framed as antisemitism—has only deepened its isolation. Its use of Holocaust memory as a political shield has tragically backfired. The conflation of antisemitism with political critique has blurred the line between legitimate criticism of Israeli policy and actual hate speech—fueling confusion, backlash, and an alarming rise in antisemitism that puts Jewish communities at greater risk. At the same time, this strategy has chilled global discourse: many who support peace, dignity, and human rights for both peoples now hesitate to speak, fearing that any expression of concern will be misread as bias or hostility. This growing silence is not neutrality; it is a retreat from moral responsibility at a time when clarity and courage are most needed.

The erosion of values laid bare by the war in Gaza is no longer confined to the battlefield—it is turning back on itself. A state that considered itself as a just, law-abiding democracy is confronting a deeper truth: those ideals were never fully extended to Palestinians, whether citizens or subjects of occupation. The same tools of control used daily against Palestinians—surveillance, vilification, repression—are now increasingly turned on Israelis themselves—hostage families

attacked, protesters branded as traitors, dissent steadily narrowed. The question is no longer whether Israel's moral compass is broken, but whether it can be restored. That restoration demands more than political change. It requires a dual reckoning: resisting the authoritarian shift consuming Israeli society—and confronting the injustices that long enabled Palestinian oppression. Only by facing both can Israeli society begin to restore its moral integrity.

Economy under strain

The moral crisis is mirrored by economic strain. Israel is financing its longest military campaign ever, diverting resources from essential services and shaking its economic foundation. GDP has shrunk. Debt is ballooning. Prices are rising. Repeated mobilizations are hollowing out the workforce. Families bear the burden of uncertainty. Class tensions are deepening, especially around military exemptions for ultra-Orthodox men. >

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Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Photo: © shutterstock

Event at the „Hostages Square“ in Tel Aviv. One chair represents one hostage.



The high-tech sector remains resilient but fragile. Investor confidence is waning, capital is leaving, and professionals are departing. A new budget has cut core services—slashing teacher salaries while raising transport costs—with channeling funds to coalition-aligned groups. These choices have added strain on working families and the poor, fueling resentment that could eventually erupt.

Democracy in retreat

At the heart of Israel's turmoil lies a contested leadership and deeper democratic erosion. Prime Minister Netanyahu, long seen as a shrewd tactician, now governs through self-preservation and ideological extremism. With his corruption trial ongoing, his overriding goal appears to be staying in power to avoid prosecution.

To that end, he relies on a coalition of far-right and ultra-Orthodox parties whose agendas prioritize exemptions, settlement expansion, and budgetary favors at the expense of national unity and rule of law. Efforts to return hostages or end the war have been subordinated to coalition demands.

Netanyahu has deflected responsibility for October 7, shifting blame and removing senior officials, replacing them with loyalists. He avoids the press, limiting appearances to scripted statements. But this crisis extends beyond one man. Government actions have deepened societal divides. The opposition remains fractured. Cracks in the coalition, especially over the draft, have emerged. Yet Netanyahu preserves his grip by appeasing extreme partners, notably by blocking aid and prolonging the war.

Public protest, though still potent, is under siege. Dissent is met with hostility. Refusal to serve remains taboo. But as frustration deepens, more reservists quietly opt out—citing work or family to avoid backlash. After two years of mass mobilization, weariness is mounting. With attention fixed on war, judicial overhaul continues, deepening democratic erosion. Whether this ends in collapse or further authoritarian drift remains to be seen. What is clear is that Israel is moving toward a more religious, militarized, and divided political order.

Pulling Back from the Brink

Civil society – a lifeline

The greatest force for course correction may lie not in politics but in civil society. While political institutions falter and leadership clings to survival, the resilience of Israeli democracy still lives in its people. Civil society—anchored in solidarity and resistance—refuses to yield. Following October 7, as the state faltered, civil society mobilized rapidly. Volunteer networks provided shelter, care, and solidarity, bridging divides and restoring dignity.

Protest has endured, unbroken, since January 2023. What began as resistance to judicial overhaul has grown into a sustained movement—demanding democratic protections, accountability, and the return of hostages. The movement is not monolithic. While united in rejecting the government's path, protesters differ in priorities—some demand a hostage deal, others focus on judicial reform, still others on ending the war and occupation. What unites them is a shared rejection of current leadership and a yearning to heal Israel's divisions.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, most Israelis believed war was inevitable, and trust in peace collapsed. Speaking about ending the occupation or pursuing a political solution became more difficult. Yet the anti-occupation, pro-peace movement continues. Groups like B'Tselem, Physicians for Human Rights, and Peace Now—many of which work closely with Palestinian partners—persist in upholding human dignity and demanding accountability, even as civic space contracts and dissent becomes riskier. Among their most powerful voices are bereaved families and hostage relatives who—despite profound trauma—insist that survival and security cannot rest on vengeance alone.

Restoring global legitimacy

Israel is facing a collapse in international legitimacy. Once regarded as a democracy defending itself, its global standing has been severely compromised. Accusations of war crimes, disregard for international law, and even genocide now shape legal proceedings and diplomacy. In May 2024, the ICC issued arrest warrants for Netanyahu and Gallant; legal exposure now extends to soldiers identified in footage.

Israel's strategy of denial is proving counterproductive. The damage is felt by ordinary Israelis; researchers face fewer invitations, travellers encounter discomfort abroad, and international partnerships are fraying. As diplomatic isolation grows, so does the urgency of reengagement with the international system—especially the United Nations. Without a change of course, Israel risks losing its place as a recognized and constructive member of the international community, slipping further into isolation and



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The resilience of Israeli democracy still lives in its people.”

pariah status. While Israel has long criticized the UN—with some justification—it is not a monolith. It reflects the presence, engagement, or absence of its Member States. Israel owes its very statehood to UN Resolution 181. Renewed legitimacy will require not withdrawal, but sustained presence, dialogue, and contribution.

A key test lies in whether Israel establishes an independent commission of inquiry into the October 7 failures. Public support is strong, but Netanyahu has delayed, insisting on political control. Such a commission must examine both the lapses that enabled the attack and the conduct of the Gaza war. Accountability is not only a moral duty — it is essential to restoring legitimacy and rebuilding trust in domestic institutions.

Choosing peace

As of April 2025, hostages remain in captivity, Gaza burns, and democratic space is under siege, with rising police aggression and intimidation of protesters. Some fear echoes of authoritarian turns in other contexts. Yet change remains possible. Despite mounting pressure on the judiciary and

moves to tighten control over the media, Israel still benefits from a vibrant public sphere, sustained by critical journalism, engaged civil society, and widespread debate. This offers real hope for urgent course correction. It is essential not only to restoring Israel’s international standing, but also to reclaiming its moral and democratic bearings. The scale of Gaza’s devastation, and the long-term consequences of the current path, can no longer be ignored.

Israel need only look to its own history to see the dividends of diplomacy. Fragile yet enduring agreements with its neighbors—from longstanding peace treaties to more recent normalization efforts—have brought immeasurable benefits and stability that force alone could never deliver. The core elements of a just and viable peace agreement have long been on the table, most notably in UN Security Council Resolution 1397, which affirms the vision of two states—Israel and Palestine—living side by side within secure and recognized borders.

Pulling back from the brink requires more than resistance. It demands a conscious decision to reject vengeance,

fear, and the paralysis that comes from looking inward while turning away from the suffering inflicted on an entire population. Real security cannot be achieved through force alone. It will require diplomacy, renewed political engagement, and a commitment to peace. Only by confronting internal fractures and acknowledging the broader human cost of this war can Israel begin to lift itself—and the region—toward a more just and sustainable future.

Osnat Lubrani served for 26 years in senior roles with the United Nations, including as UN Resident and Humanitarian Coordinator in Ukraine (2018–2022), Fiji and nine other Pacific Island States (2013–2018), and Kosovo (2009–2013). She also held leadership roles with UNDP and UN Women. Her work has focused on transitions from conflict to peace, humanitarian crisis to recovery, and advancing sustainable development, with a strong emphasis on gender equality and human rights. She is currently affiliated with the oiiip and is a member of Diplomats Without Borders and MENA2050.